

**Testimony of Scotty Herriman,
Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts Vice-President;**

**Presented to the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT, RURAL
DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH
Of the
COMMITTEE OF AGRICULTURE
United States House of Representatives**

September 18, 2006

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I am Scotty Herriman, an Agriculture Producer from Northeast Oklahoma, Vice President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) and a member of the Nowata County Conservation District Board. On behalf of OACD, our local Conservation Districts, our directors, employees, associate members and the thousands of Oklahoma land-owner cooperators, I want to take this opportunity to submit testimony in support of the Conservation Title of the 2002 Farm Bill and to suggest for your consideration ideas for the improvement and expansion of current USDA conservation initiatives.

First let me say that we at OACD believe that the 2002 farm bill marked a watershed for conservation in the United States. The level of interest in conservation and the corresponding funding of voluntary, locally-led conservation initiatives nationwide marked a new area in the partnership between the federal and state governments, local conservation districts and individual landowner cooperators in the locally-led, voluntary protection of our soil, water, air and wildlife habitats. The expansion of existing programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) combined with the creation of new initiatives such as the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and the Conservation Security Program (CSP) has set the tone for the delivery of assistance to producers, helping them address environmental concerns through cooperative approaches instead of heavy-handed regulations. With the help of the assets provide in the last farm bill, we have made a significant impact on the landscape and have addressed numerous

natural resource issues. Truly the conservation title of the farm bill has extended the opportunity for USDA financial and technical assistance to every corner of the state and all segments of Oklahoma agriculture.

That said however, we have much more to do. We must maintain this level of commitment to conservation as we move into the next farm bill if we are going to help producers address the myriad natural resource challenges they face. An example of one such challenge is the spread of the Eastern Red Cedar, a native plant that has broken its historical bounds in our state due to changes in land use over the last 100 years. This invasive species is currently infesting 700 acres of Oklahoma EVERY DAY. That's 700 acres every day lost for grazing, 700 acres every day on which wildlife habitat has been degraded or destroyed and 700 acres every day that presents a greater fire hazard due to the existence of this highly flammable tree. In addition, the Red Cedar and the more aggressive Salt Cedar consume on average 100 gallons of water PER TREE PER DAY. Clearly this presents a challenge for landowners that must be addressed. Currently, we do not have the EQIP funds sufficient to address the challenges presented by invasive species such as the Red Cedar while at the same time continuing the other work we do in conserving our soil, protecting our water and improving wildlife habitats. We must maintain the commitment Congress made for conservation in the last farm bill and build on its success to address these types of challenges.

As we renew the nation's commitment to conservation however, we must remember that program funding alone is not all that is needed. Technical Assistance dollars must also be made available to ensure that these programs are delivered effectively and that producers have the assistance they need to properly address the natural resource issues they face on their land. The current level of financial assistance, while welcome, is straining the existing delivery system. Congress should ensure that adequate funding is provided to NRCS for the human resources to deliver the various farm bill programs. This delivery should be done through the existing NRCS system in cooperation with the local conservation districts and the various state conservation agencies. Congress should also re-invest in general technical assistance for producers through the NRCS. With the increase in program dollars we have seen since 2002, we have lost some of the past focus on conservation planning and assistance to landowners with non-farm bill program conservation. It is this conservation planning that often shows landowners what natural resource issues they need to address on their land which then leads to their utilization of the farm bill programs. In addition, landowners also often follow up on the conservation work they have done through a program like EQIP by asking the local NRCS staff what other improvements they could make to their operation. Without a solid level of technical assistance support locally through NRCS in cooperation with the local conservation district, this help would not be available and this additional conservation work would not take place, leading to greater challenges in the future and more pressure on landowners.

Many of the changes in the area of technical assistance in the last farm bill, while well meaning did not perform as anticipated. The primary example of this was the push to move toward private sector technical service providers (TSP). While this concept looked good on paper, in reality it has been a bust. In Oklahoma, few private sector TSPs are available for hire by landowners. In addition, those that are in business charge a level far above the percentage of program dollars that NRCS has traditionally utilized for farm bill delivery. These providers also are often hesitant to deal with producers with only a small number of acres in need of improvement. Private sector TSPs seem to prefer larger projects with a much larger pay scale. While the push toward private sector TSPs has not been successful in our state, one change to the delivery system that has worked is the utilization of the partnership between the NRCS, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and the local conservation districts in farm bill delivery. By training local district employees and Conservation Commission employees to help deliver farm bill programs and do conservation planning, we have been able to effectively and efficiently deliver the increase level of program dollars we have seen since 2002 while leading the nation in sign-up of producers for new programs such as CSP. We believe NRCS should have greater flexibility to work with local districts and state conservation agencies to build on this type of success.

We also believe the practice of utilizing local conservation district boards as the entity that sets priorities for local conservation as done by NRCS in Oklahoma should be the model nation wide. In Oklahoma, our local landowners, through their locally elected conservation district directors, help set the priorities for conservation work in their local area, providing not only local input, but also local producer buy-in. This is how conservation was originally supposed to work. Who knows better the needs of the local area than the people who live there? NRCS should consult these local boards to ensure that they have the input of local citizens, not just from a statewide source such as the State Technical Committee, but from the landowners within a more limited geographic region. By doing this, NRCS would avoid “cookie-cutter” approaches that assume that one size will fit all. By moving more responsibility to the local level, NRCS would also enjoy the support and buy in of the local producers who elected the board members and who know them as neighbors and friends. It is much easier to have a local producer convince a landowner of the need to address a natural resource issue than to have someone from Washington D.C. or even Oklahoma City try and do it. We at OACD feel it is time to write into the conservation title of the farm bill the role of Local Conservation Districts as the entity that helps set local conservation priorities. We also believe it is time to place all USDA conservation programs including CRP and GRP under the conservation district/NRCS umbrella.

In the area of Farm Bill Programs, OACD feels that many improvements can be made to the existing alphabet soup of conservation initiatives. First, we feel that the current rate of cost-share to producers needs to be reviewed. The current rates of cost-share today are often times too low to allow farmers and ranchers who are

suffering economically to participate. This is especially evident in this record drought year. Because of this, absentee landowners with non-farm income and those many consider as “hobby farmers,” (people who live on acreages in the country but work primarily in the city) are the ones who can most readily take advantage of farm bill conservation programs. While we wish to serve these customers and are appreciative of their participation in conservation programs, we believe some thought should be given to ensuring that full time agriculture producers have the ability to access programs, even during down turns in the agriculture economy. We also believe it is important that the next farm bill continues to tie participation in USDA programs to a conservation plan. These plans help producers identify needs on their land and help set the stage for good stewardship work by the landowners. We believe conservation plans are a critical element in the delivery of federal conservation programs and should be a part of the next farm bill.

We feel EQIP is, for the most part, working well. We would ask that funding at the current levels be continued (or increased) and that Congress take into consideration the technical assistance needs necessary to deliver this program. WHIP, however, currently is facing a backlog of applicants in Oklahoma who cannot take advantage of this program due to inadequate funding. If this program is continued, it should be funded at a much higher level. We continue to see an increase in interest in wildlife habitat improvement and protection from our cooperators. WHIP, if properly funded, could become the flagship program for helping improve our wildlife habitats on working lands nation wide.

CRP is a popular program that has done much in its retirement of some of our most marginal land in Western Oklahoma. During this record drought, one can speculate that much of this land would again be subject to wind erosion on par with that of the 1930’s if it was again in crop production. That said, OACD feels that more flexibility is needed in this program to address sensitive lands. Too often CRP has been treated as a program to reduce commodity production rather than as a conservation program. That said we support CRP.

There has been much interest in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in Oklahoma. Unfortunately recent changes in the land appraisal process have reduced participation. Last year 24 WRP projects were planned in Oklahoma. Of these only 8 were accepted by landowners after the appraisals were done on the land in question. We would also ask that WRP be taken out from under the CRP cap for counties. We have land in Oklahoma, especially in the panhandle, that could be under the WRP today except for the fact that the counties in which this land resides is currently at or over its CRP cap. This needs to change.

When considering the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), Congress needs to seriously review this program to ensure that it is meeting the vision of Chairman Lucas. The rental rates that have been set by the Farm Services Agency (FSA) have limited the number of acres that can be enrolled. Additional funding is

needed to increase participation. This program could play a major role in protecting ranchlands and preserving certain sensitive ecological habitats, but as it is currently being implemented, few acres are being enrolled. We support this program, but we feel it needs review.

Finally, we feel that the Conservation Security Program (CSP), like the Grassland Reserve Program, is an exciting new program that has not been implemented in a manner consistent with the vision laid out for it by Congress. The concept of rewarding landowners for practicing stewardship is one that we whole heartedly support. The possibilities of rewarding those good stewards of the land while providing additional motivation for other landowners to follow the lead of their more conservation minded neighbors are incredible in their possible scope of reach. That said, the way the program is currently being run falls short of this goal. The practice of only signing up certain watersheds and then closing the program for that area does not meet the vision that was laid out for this program in the 2002 farm bill. This program should be nationwide in scope and be a continuing option for landowners. As with any new program, producers often learn from mistakes in the original sign-up period or they see ways in which they can improve their operation for next year's participation. This is not possible in the current framework of CSP as interpreted by the administration. We believe the intention of this program was for it to be a nationwide, multi-year program instead of the limited program currently being run. We support CSP but would ask that Congress ensure that it be run as it was intended in the 2002 farm bill.

Before closing I also should mention the importance of the watershed rehabilitation program to the state of Oklahoma. Our state is home to the first flood control dam built in the nation, Cloud Creek Watershed Dam #1 near Cordell in Washita County. Oklahoma is also proud to be the home of the first fully completed Watershed Project in the United States, the Sandstone Creek Watershed Project located in the home county of Chairman Lucas, Roger Mills County. Today, Oklahoma has more flood control structures than any other state in the Union. These 'Silent Sentinels' continue to stand guard in our countryside, protecting our citizens from the devastation of life and property that results from flooding. Every year these structures provide an estimated \$71 million dollar in flood prevention benefits to the state. Clearly this infrastructure has been and continues to be a blessing for the citizens of Oklahoma.

Unfortunately, like any other piece of man-made infrastructure, these flood control dams must be maintained and in time rehabilitated. As you are well aware, the vast majority of the flood control dams built in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's were constructed with a life expectancy of 50 years. It takes very simple math to deduce that the time has come for a major effort to be made in rehabilitating these structures. Currently, Oklahoma has 132 dams past their 50 year design life. Over the course of the next 10 years, we will see 1,100 more structures reach this dangerous road mark. Oklahoma has today rehabilitated over 28 structures, more than any other state in the country, but clearly more must be

done. We all witnessed what happened in New Orleans when infrastructure dedicated to water impoundment was allowed to fall into disrepair. Clearly we want to ensure that these 'Silent Sentinels' remain on watch and remain silent because we are all too well aware of the noise they could make. We want to applaud Chairman Lucas and the other members of the Sub-Committee for their foresight in passing language in the year 2000 to provide matching funds from the federal government to help states begin the process of rehabilitating these aging dams. We also want to convey our appreciation for the continued funding of this program and for the increase this program received for 2006. Clearly we have a long way to go on this issue. We at OACD want to again voice our support for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program as well as the Flood Prevention Operations Program (PL78-534) and the Small Watershed Program (PL 83-566). It is our understanding that the watershed rehabilitation program needs to be re-authorized as part of the next farm bill and we would urge Congress to take this action.

Again, I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Sub-Committee. We appreciate all you do for rural America and we ask that you continue to support American Agriculture and the protection of our natural resources through voluntary, locally-led, cooperative conservation.

Thank you again for allowing myself and OACD this opportunity.

Respectfully submitted by:

Scotty Herriman,
Vice President, Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts;

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. Name: Scotty J. Herriman
2. Business Address: _____
Rt. 1, Box 209
South Coffeyville, OK 74072
3. Business Phone Number: 918.255.6437
4. Organization you represent: Okla. Association of Conservation Districts
5. Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualification to provide testimony before the Committee:
36 years as a full time farmer applying conservation practices to the land

6. Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:
Nowata County Conservation District Director 29 years
Past State President of the Oklahoma RC&D Council
Vice President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts
7. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:
Vice President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

PLEASE ATTACH THIS FORM OR YOUR BIOGRAPHY TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: Scotty J. Herriman

Address: Rt. 1, Box 209, South Coffeyville, OK 74072

Telephone: 918.255.6437

Organization you represent (if any): _____

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: N/A Amount: 0

Source: N/A Amount: 0

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: N/A Amount: 0

Source: N/A Amount: 0

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: _____

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PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.